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Transcript: AMA President Dr Michael Gannon on Sky News, *The Latest*, Wednesday 5 July 2017

Subjects: Medicare breach

ASHLEIGH GILLON: You are with *The Latest*. There have, as we know, been fears about the security of Australians' health records after we learnt yesterday that dozens of Medicare card numbers had been illegally sold online. Joining us now for more on this is the President of the Australian Medical Association, Michael Gannon. Michael, good to see you, thanks for your time. How worried are you about the security of our health records?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I think we need to separate the two issues here, Ashleigh. Certainly what's happened is that someone has been able to find their- get their hands on Medicare card numbers. Now the greatest concern of that was that either, one, that it could be used to perform identity fraud or two, perhaps more importantly, to gain access to the My Health Record. I'm pleased with the briefings I've received from Minister Tudge today and from the Australian Digital Health Agency that there are numerous other checks in place, numerous other bits of information that are required before you can hack into the My Health Record.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: You mention the Minister, we know that he's been very clear on this that this was not a cyber attack per se. He's described it as more of a common criminal activity. Does that mean that it's more likely that it's someone with authorised access to Medicare numbers, who is either selling the information or passing that on somehow for profit?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, certainly a system exists where doctors, or staff working for them, can look up a patient's Medicare number. Now, this system exists to facilitate the care of patients in an emergency setting or just if they've forgotten their card when they attend a doctor, it's to enable direct refunds of rebates to patients. So there are numerous elements of the system that support care, but it is the case that that is one method by which someone could get hold of Medicare numbers. And sadly, it's the case that someone could potentially use numbers in that way to derive a profit to commit a crime.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: So have authorities or the Minister indicated to you that this specific breach did come from inside a GP office?

MICHAEL GANNON: Look, all we know is that this has been referred to the Australian Federal Police and that that investigation is ongoing. The freedom with which this information is available to doctors' surgeries is an important element of care. It would be a shame if it was being used fraudulently and that that access which often facilitates the care of someone who perhaps hasn't done the wrong thing in forgetting their Medicare number, if it impedes that access to care.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: So if it does turn out - and I should stress that this is speculation at this point - if it does turn out that someone within a GP office, a receptionist for example, authorised these Medicare numbers and did pass them on or either sold them for profit, would you expect that we would see a push for access to these numbers to be tightened?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, I would understand if there was that push and then we'd have to try to make the argument as to why exactly it might remain. I mean, in terms of the

assertions that this threatens the integrity of patients' individual electronic health records, again, I was glad to receive reassurances that there are numerous elements to security. Of course, one of those is that there's a way of checking exactly who has looked at an electronic health record. Perhaps that would be the way forward, in that there's a very clear system and that system may well exist as to exactly who is accessing this information. Clearly it's meant to facilitate patient care. Having access to details like Medicare cards is something that doctors need to take very seriously, as do the staff who work in their rooms.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: And so just to clarify, Dr Gannon, if somebody who works in a GP office does call up Human Services and say this is the person's name, this is their date of birth, can I have their Medicare number, is that traced? Can that be traced? Is there some sort of record of that happening or is there something that actually happens quite frequently and there's no actual record of that?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well, what we do know is that that happens hundreds of times every day. Thousands of times every week. And it's an important element of care. I don't know the answer as to whether or not it's recorded. If that turns out to be the story in this case, well, I would expect that if there would be that kind of call, that there's a way of tracing exactly who is seeking this information. I think the fact that it is provided probably helps patients far more often than not. We'd hate to see this system brought down, if it is the case that this is the fraudulent activity of one or two individuals.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: And would the AMA be pushing for that? For this to be recorded? For this to be able to be traced as a result of this breach?

MICHAEL GANNON: Well I think that what we never want to see is any impediment to the access of a patient receiving care. We'd hate to be in the situation where a patient of limited means is denied care at a bulk billing GP clinic, at a hospital with a specialist, because they're not able to produce the little green card. Equally, it's so important that the integrity of this kind of information is maintained. It might be the case that it requires more checks and balances.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Dr Michael Gannon, appreciate you joining us live there from Perth this evening. Thanks for your time.

MICHAEL GANNON: Okay, a pleasure Ashleigh.

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